

LESSON 11:

Rediscovering Redeeming Love

Three Covenants Initiated by One

Getting Started

The idea that the Bible is structured around covenants has been a part of Reformed Theology since its earliest beginnings. It is seen at the very outset of the Swiss Reformation in the writings of Ulrich Zwingli and his successor, Heinrich Bullinger, and is also implicit in the works of John Calvin.

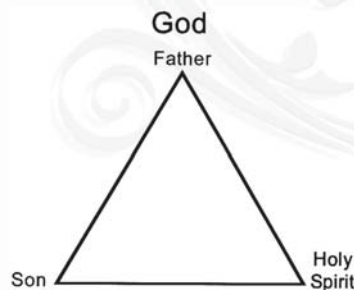
Although the Reformed theologians all emphasized the centrality of covenant in the redemptive story, they had varying opinions on how many covenants there actually were. Theologian Edward Dowey notes three stages of development in the reformed understanding of the biblical covenant. First, in Calvin's writing, covenant was described only in God's relationship to the patriarchs, Israel, and the church. Second, after the time of Calvin, the concept of covenant was understood to go back to God's demands of obedience on Adam. Third, still later, reformed thinkers extended the concept to beyond the constraints of time to the covenant made between the three persons of the Trinity to provide redemption for God's people.

Johannes Cocceius is the name most commonly associated with covenant theology. He developed a covenant understanding of biblical redemption in his work *Doctrine of the Covenant and Testaments of God* (1648). He held to three periods of God's covenant dealings with humanity:

- Covenant of Works with Adam
- Covenant of Grace with Moses
- New Covenant of Jesus Christ

This emphasis on the centrality of covenant in God's dealings with humanity was later revived by the Puritans and brought to center stage in their *Westminster Confession*.

These three covenants provided the structure of God's dealings with the salvation of man. But what about the covenant between the three persons of the Trinity which later reformers stressed? This covenant is known as the *Covenant of Redemption*. It focuses on the total agreement between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the plan of salvation. This covenant defines the roles of the persons of the Trinity in salvation of man.



To refer to the agreement among the members of the Trinity as a 'covenant,' reminds us that it was something voluntarily undertaken by God, not something that he had to enter into by virtue of his nature. However, this covenant is also different from the covenants between God and man because the parties enter into it as equals, whereas in covenants with man God is the sovereign Creator who imposes the provisions of the covenant by his own decree.

—Wayne Grudem,
Systematic Theology

- **Father**—sends the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- **Son**—enters the arena of the world by incarnation voluntarily. He is no reluctant Redeemer.
- **Holy Spirit**—applies the work of Christ to us for our salvation. The Spirit does not chafe at doing Father’s bidding.

Each person of the Trinity is pleased to carry out His respective mission. Without this agreement between the Trinity the other three, covenants would not exist. John 3:16 says:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus often spoke of his willingness to carry out the Father’s purpose. He said that doing the Father’s will is his *food* (John 4:32). He was consumed by zeal for his Father’s house (John 2:17). He promised His disciple that they would inherit a kingdom the Father had prepared for them from the beginning (Matt. 25:34). He stated that no one could come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

All of these points look *backward* to a time in eternity, when the three members of the Trinity united to put forth the plan of salvation. Just as all three members of the Trinity were involved in the act of creation, all three were involved in the plan of redemption. The *Covenant of Redemption* was no afterthought designed to repair a creation run amuck. There was no such thing as a “Plan B.” God’s plan for salvation was conceived before creation and before the fall, though he conceived this plan in light of man’s fall and designed it to effect redemption from the fall.

In this *Getting Started*, we have dealt with what is known as the *Covenant of Redemption* between the three persons of the Trinity. During the rest of this lesson we will look at the three covenants between God and man.

The thoughts for this week are:

Covenant of Works with Adam

Covenant of Grace with Moses

New Covenant of Grace with Christians

Covenant of Works with Adam

The initial covenant between God and man is called the *Covenant of Works*. According to the *Westminster Confession*, “life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience (works).” Some have questioned whether it is appropriate to speak of a Covenant of Works that God had with Adam and Eve in the Garden because the actual word *covenant* is not used in the Genesis narratives. However, the essential parts of the covenant are all there—a clear definition of the parties involved, a legally binding set of provisions that stipulates clear definition of the parties involved, a legally binding set of provisions that stipulates the conditions of their relationship, the promise of blessings for obedience, and the conditions for obtaining those blessings. The penalty for disobedience is both physical and spiritual death. (See the chart on the last page of this lesson.)

Man is created in God’s image and is given the ability and duty to mirror and reflect God’s holy character. There is no room for the slightest transgression. Originally *all* sin was a capital offense worthy of the death penalty. In the Old Testament, a whole catalog of sins required the death penalty. From the vantage point of the New Testament, sin in the Old Testament may have been treated harshly, but in view of the Covenant of Works, the penal code in the Old Testament is quite mild. God’s original message about sin is clear. “The soul that sins will die.”

Our modern culture makes light of sin. All the time you hear people say, “Nobody’s perfect,” or “Everyone is entitled to one mistake.” But there is no such entitlement program with God. Here’s the deal: “Sin is a moral revulsion to a holy God, an act of unspeakable arrogance, that any mortal would deign to set his or her will in opposition to the will of the sovereign God.” (Sproul)

1. (a) What does James 2:10 say about breaking just one law of God’s?

- (b) Read James 2: 8-12. From this passage, and others you might know, do you believe there are categories of sin—and that God judges some more harshly than others? Why or why not?

2. (a) How does Hosea refer to the agreement between God and Adam in Hosea 6:7?

- (b) Why do you believe this covenant was named the Covenant of Works?

A single sin is enough to violate the Covenant of Works and make us debtors who cannot pay our own debt to God. That we, after even a single sin, have any hope of redemption is due to God’s grace and God’s grace alone.

–R.C. Sproul,

Essential Truths of the Christian Faith

(c) According to Romans 3:23, is there anyone who has not violated the Covenant of Works?

3. (a) The conditions for the Covenant of Works are given in Genesis 2:17. Who mandated the conditions? Did the other party have any thing at all to say in setting down the conditions?

(b) What was the penalty for not keeping the terms of the covenant?

Adam and Eve's death was both *physical* and *spiritual*. Wayne Grudem says: "The punishment of (physical) death began to be carried out on the day that Adam and Eve sinned, but it was carried out slowly over time, as their bodies grew old and they eventually died. The promise of spiritual death was put into effect immediately, since they were cut off from fellowship with God."

4. God reveals His plan of redemption for His fallen creatures immediately. What does God do in Genesis 3:21 that involves the *shedding of blood*?

The names of the two covenants, one of work and one of grace, may be misleading. They could give the idea that the original covenant lacks any element of grace. But the fact that God creates us and gives us the gift of life is already an act of grace. He was under no obligation to create anyone. Once created, we had no claim on God to enter into a covenant with us. God's promise of life on the condition of obedience has its origin in his grace. Out of grace He offered a reward. He was under no obligation to do so. Sproul reminds us: "It is the creature's intrinsic duty to obey his Creator, with or without the prospect of reward."

- God's first covenant with man was the Covenant of Works in the Garden of Eden.
- All human beings are violators of the Covenant of Works.
- The penalty for not keeping the Covenant of Works was death.

Truth for Today: ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

Covenant of Grace with Moses

When man failed to obtain the blessing offered in the Covenant of Works, God established another means by which man could be saved. After the fall of man in Genesis 3, the rest of Scripture is the story of God working out in history the amazing plan of redemption, whereby sinful people could come into fellowship with Him. Once again God clearly defines the provisions of a covenant that would specify the relationship between Himself and those whom He would redeem. In these specifications, we find some variation in detail throughout the Old and New Testaments; but, the essential elements of a covenant are all there, and the nature of those essential elements remains the same throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament.

As in the Covenant of Works, the parties in the Covenant of Grace are God and the people whom He will redeem. But in the Covenant of Grace, Christ fulfills a special role as mediator, whereas there was no mediator between God and man in the Covenant of Works. Another major difference between the two covenants is that the Covenant of Grace was made between God and sinners, and the previous covenant was not (see chart in the next section). Once the Covenant of Works was violated by the fall, mankind's only hope was rooted in grace. One of the hallmarks of Reformed Theology according to the *Westminster Confession* (see margin) is that the way of salvation in the Old Testament is substantially the same as the New Testament. Redemption is *always* through grace by faith.

1. Why do you believe there was no *mediator* necessary in the Covenant of Works?

2. Read Hebrews 9:14-15. What do you believe is meant by the “new covenant” and the “first covenant” in verse 13?

- (b) From what did Christ set those under the “new covenant” free?

- (c) Describe ways you have been aware of that freedom this week?

It is important to remember that the way of salvation, even in the Covenant of Grace, is still tied to the Covenant of Works. The Covenant of Grace did not destroy God's original covenant with man, but actually makes it possible for it to be fulfilled (Matt. 5:17). R.C. Sproul says: “Though the gracious doctrine of justification by faith is the essence of the gospel, we ought not forget that our salvation is ultimately accomplished by the fulfillment of the covenant of works. This is achieved by the second Adam, Christ himself, who by his perfect and

*Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the **Covenant of Grace**; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.*

—The Westminster Confession

*Grace—**God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment.***

—Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology

personal obedience fulfills the requirements of the covenant of works. What is so gracious about the covenant of grace is that God accepts Christ's obedience to the covenant of works in our place. He does for us what we are incapable of doing for ourselves."

1. Read Romans 5:12-19.

(a) According to verses 12-14, how did sin enter the world and what was the result?

(b) Why did men not break the law from the time of Adam to the time of Moses?

(c) What was the "gift that came by the grace of the one man" in verse 15? (Also read verse 17.) Who was the man in verse 15?

(d) According to verse 19, what was the result of the *disobedience* of Adam and the *obedience* of Christ?

(e) How do these verses explain how the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace are related?

2. What was the unfallen man (Adam) capable of that the fallen man (everyone after Adam) was not? Why is this so important to your understanding of the entire Bible?

- The Covenant of Grace was initiated after man became incapable of keeping the Covenant of Works because of his fallen, sinful state.
- With the Covenant of Grace, a mediator became necessary.
- Christ, through His perfect obedience, fulfilled the Covenant of Works for us.

Truth for Today: For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith. Romans 1:12

New Covenant of Grace with Christians

The new Covenant of Grace was initiated after the death of Christ with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This was about 1,440 years after the Covenant of Grace was initiated by God and given to Moses. The *Westminster Confession* makes it clear that in Reformed Theology, the way of salvation in the Old Testament is substantially the same as in the New Testament. Redemption is always through grace by faith. In the Old Testament, faith was directed *forward* to the promised future Redeemer; while, in the New Testament, faith is directed backward to the redemptive work of Christ, which has been accomplished in history.

Your Bible is basically divided into two covenants. The word testament actually means covenant. The Old Testament is about the Old Covenant of the Law which God made with Moses. It required for man to be obedient to the Law, but provided forgiveness through the shedding of the blood of animals. Then there is the New Testament or New Covenant that God made with Christians. It provided the Holy Spirit so man could keep the Law and provided forgiveness through the blood of Christ. But, in both covenants, faith was the mechanism by which people were saved (Rom. 4:16-25). It is vital that you understand that all you have to do is have faith that God is going to do what He said He would do to meet the covenant terms and all the benefits of the covenant relationship with God are yours. This was true with Abraham and has been true with all who followed him.

What terms does God promise in the New Covenant? He promises salvation, eternal life, and the inheritance of all the benefits of being in God's family. (Ps. 139:3-10) Everything that belongs to Him belongs to you. God stands behind you and backs you with His power, His holiness, and His glory. (John 1:12-13; Rom. 8:14-17)

Covenant partners were willing to die for one another and covenants were unbreakable to the ancients. This means if you have come into a relationship with Christ that relationship cannot be broken, and you cannot lose your salvation and your sonship. Jesus says in John 10:28:

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

There is nothing the Christian can do to break the covenant God made with him. The binding part of the covenant is in the *blood*, not anything the believer does or does not do!

A covenant meal was often eaten following a covenant agreement. The total oneness was emphasized as each partner took a piece of bread and put it in his blood brother's mouth. Each one saying in effect, "**You are eating me. Everything that you are is becoming a part of me.**" Often this was when the liquid (intermingled with the new partner's blood) was drunk (although this was not always part of the ritual.) Each new covenant partner was saying, "You are drinking me. Our lives will forever be intermingled." With the covenant meal each partner partook of the other as they became one. It was a picture of giving oneself to another unconditionally, completely, and eternally.

Three Covenants Between God and Man			
	Covenant of Works	Covenant of Grace	New Covenant of Grace
Parties	God and Man	God and Man	God and Man
Initiator	God	God	God
Time	At Creation	After the Fall	The Death of Christ
Condition	Perfect Obedience	Faith in Christ (who satisfied the condition of the covenant of works)	Faith in Christ (who satisfied the condition of the covenant of works)
Reward	Physical and Spiritual Live	Spiritual Life	Spiritual Life
Penalty	Immediate Death (physical and spiritual)	Spiritual Death	Spiritual Death

2. Examine the chart above.

(a) What differences do you see between the Covenant of Works and the other two covenants?

(b) What differences do you see between the Covenant of Grace and the New Covenant of Grace?

3. If someone asked you how many basic covenants are recognized in Reformed Theology, what would be your answer? How would you tell them that covenants related to this system of theology?

4. (a) Why do you believe this study has been entitled *Rediscovering God's Redeeming Love*?
